

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY, 1919-39

I. THE PEACE SETTLEMENT AND THE LEAGUE

I N the opening years of the twentieth century British policy was shaped by three major principles. All were designed to ensure the security of our possessions and communications, for the era of expansion was over. Two of them, naval supremacy in home waters and the Balance of Power in Europe, were centuries old. The third, our partnership with France, was new but none the less significant, for she was bound to be either an enemy or a friend. The resolve of William II and Tirpitz to add a mighty fleet to the strongest army in the world drove Great Britain almost automatically into the arms of France and Russia. If the violation of Belgian neutrality was the immediate cause of our declaration of war in 1914 and gave a certain moral consecration to our effort, the deeper motive of intervention was to save France from catastrophic defeat. Lord Haldane used to say that the much discussed question of our commitments was largely irrelevant, since our action was dictated by our plainest interests. If we had stood aside the Continent would inevitably have been dominated by Germany, and the Balance of Power would have been overthrown. Victory was only achieved with the aid of the United States, and was registered in six treaties—with Germany (Versailles) June 28, 1919; with Austria (St. Germain) September 10, 1919; with Bulgaria (Neuilly) November 27, 1919; with Hungary (Trianon) June 4th, 1920; with Turkey (Sevres) August 1920, and

(Lausanne) July 23, 1923. Their disintegration
is the main
theme of European history during the last two
decades.

The disappearance of four empires (Germany,
Austria,
Russia, Turkey) confronted our statesmen with
formidable
problems. The immediate task of the Allies was
to divide the
spoils in Europe and elsewhere. It was not easy,
for secret
treaties had in some measure tied our hands,
and certain parts
of Europe were too mixed for effective self-
determination;
but it was less difficult than the problem of
rebuilding a
shattered world. For this urgent enterprise
there were two